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ABSTRACT

The traumatic effect of divorce on young children is discussed, noting the typical changes in behavior evidenced by children in such a situation. Suggestions are made on ways parents can cope with the child's emotional reactions and alleviate the stress that is natural when a marriage dissolves. (JD)

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DIVORCE AND CHILDREN

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DIVORCE AND CHILDREN

The Story of Bubbles

By Beth Goff*

There once was a little girl called Janeydear.

She lived in a house with her daddy and mommy and a dog named Funny.

Her daddy named the dog Funny because that's what he was. And her daddy called Jane Janeydear, because that's what she was.

Daddy was an important person. He went to work and earned the money that mommy used to buy groceries with. Sometimes, though, he didn't want to play, and he'd be angry at Janey if she made too much noise. Then Janey would be angry at him.

Mommy said daddy only scolded because he had headaches and didn't feel well. Janey guessed she knew about that because sometimes she had colds and felt bad, too. But it was always disappointing when daddy didn't want to play.

One morning Funny was eating breakfast from his bowl on the kitchen floor, while Janey was eating hers at the kitchen table. Mommy was frying pancakes.

"Where's daddy?" Janey asked. "Is he still asleep?"

After a minute, mommy said, "Daddy--isn't here."

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* Permission Requested.

Mommy went to the sink and turned the water on. The water sprayed out as it came down, and it looked white.

"White water!" Janey said. "Like the edges of waves!" Then she remembered about daddy. "When is daddy coming home?"

"I don't know," mommy said. Janey got a sudden full-up feeling in her stomach and didn't want any more pancakes. She slid off her chair and sat down on the floor beside Funny. "You and Funny and I will be keeping house for a while," mommy said. Janey didn't say anything.

Daddy didn't come home for days and days. Janey felt lonesome for him. Mommy was nice most of the time, but she didn't want to play. Only Funny was fun. Janey wondered if daddy stayed away because he was angry at her.

But then he did come, and Janey was so glad to see him! He took her to the beach. Not Funny, not mommy, just Janey-dear.

They played in the white water where the waves ended, and they sat in the sand and made a sand house. And then they picked up a million seashells and daddy wrote Funny's name with shells on the sand.

Janey said, "Go on, daddy. Write mommy's name!" And he didn't.

He said, "Janeydear, mommy and I are going to get a divorce.

Janey asked, "What's that?" She knew from the way he said it, it wasn't something nice.

Daddy tried to explain, but it was hard for Janey to listen. She was watching the waves, one after another, never quite the same. "Why does the water turn white?" She asked.

"Oh, never mind!" daddy said. He sounded cross. "It's time to go home." Janey started to cry. "Why are you crying?" daddy asked. But Janey couldn't tell him.

When they got home, daddy came into the house. Janey wanted to keep him there, so she tried to sit on his lap every minute. When mommy said she had to go to bed, Janey said, "No!" and made a great fuss. Then mommy and daddy began yelling at each other, and Janey howled at the top of her lungs because she was sorry she'd made a fuss, and she didn't want them to yell like that.

When they put her in bed and went downstairs, Janey could still hear her mommy's and daddy's voices going up and down, sometimes soft, sometimes shouty. The anger between them made a pain inside her, and she cried and cried.

After a long, long time, daddy came in, and he stood by her bed saying, "Janeydear, Janeydear," until she stopped crying. Then he said, "I'll always be your daddy just the same." He sounded nice, and Janeydear was very, very sleepy, so she went to sleep.

Next morning, mommy said the same thing, "Daddy will always be your daddy." But he wasn't there. He'd gone away again. Mommy said, "You and Funny and I will go to live with grandma." Janey didn't say anything, and mommy asked, "You like grandma, don't you?"

Janey liked grandma, but she didn't like grandma's house. Nobody ever wanted to play except Funny, and Funny wished they were in their real house, too. Grandma tried to keep Funny out. This made Janey and her dog unhappy, and Janey cried and yelled at grandma, and grandma said she was a bad girl.

Whenever Janey asked mommy when they could go home, mommy didn't answer. Sometimes Janey yelled at mommy because it made her mad not to know when they could go home. It made her mad that daddy went away. Janey knew it was bad to yell so much, but she just couldn't help it.

Then the worst thing happened. Mommy got a job and was gone all day, like Daddy used to be. A great big fear grew inside of Janey--she was afraid her mommy would go away for all the time, like daddy had. So Janey begged her mommy not to leave. Mommy promised she would come home every night. But grandma said mommy would not want to come home at all if Janey was so bad and angry and cried so much.

Janey remembered that she'd been angry at daddy sometimes before he went away. She used to get mad at him when he didn't want to play.

Janey decided it was very bad to be angry, because terrible things happened. She knew she must never say anything angry again, never ever.

And so she said hardly anything at all, because if she did talk even a little, some madness might leak out and then mommy would go away forever.

Mommy said, "Janey, you used to be my chatterbox! What's the matter, darling?" But Janey didn't tell her.

Grandma said, "She must be coming down with something!" So mommy took Janey to the doctor, but he couldn't find what was wrong.

Janey didn't even fuss when grandma chased Funny out of the house.

One day Janey went out to talk to Funny, but Funny wasn't there. Janey called him twice, three times, seven times. Finally Funny came. All of a sudden Janey was so mad at Funny--she was so mad that she hit him and hit him. Funny yelped and ran away. Janey sat down hard on the ground. She had hurt Funny, and she felt bad about it and glad about it, both at the same time.

"Janey!" It was mommy. She had seen what Janey did. Janey thought mommy would scold her, but she just said in a puzzled way, "Funny loves you, and you hit him!"

Janey cried, "He went away like you and daddy, and I hate him!"

Mommy sat right down on the ground beside Janey and hugged her until Janey was quiet.

The next day mommy asked, "Janey, would you like to come downtown and see where mommy works?"

"Yes," Janey said, so that's what happened. Grandma and Janey went to mommy's office, and Janey played with mommy's typewriter and said hello to some people and saw where mommy hung her coat and kept her pencils. Then grandma and Janey went home.

And grandma said, "I guess it isn't much fun for you here, Janey. Come sit on grandma's lap--I'll read you a story." Janey listened hard. When the story was over, she said, "Read it again, grandma!" and grandma did.

And every morning when she went to work, mommy said, "Janeydear, remember, I'm coming back home tonight. I'm never going to stay away, never, ever." And she always did come home.

And grandma began to be nicer to Funny, and she let him in the house sometimes. She even said he was quite a good little dog.

And when Janey asked about him, mommy talked about daddy. She explained that there were lots and lots of reasons why daddy went away, but none of them were Janey's fault. Mommy said that Janey was a good girl, she was Janeydear, so daddy certainly didn't leave because she was bad. Daddy would come to see Janey whenever he possibly could, mommy said.

And pretty soon daddy did come, and Janey was so glad to see him! They went to the zoo. This time Janey knew that daddy would go away again, but it was fun to be at the zoo. Janey held tight to daddy's hand, and they watched the seal splashing in the water. Janey asked, "Why does the water turn white?" And daddy looked at her and said, "Bubbles, Janeydear. The seals splash air into the water, and it makes tiny little bubbles."

"Oh," Janey said, "Bubbles, bubbles, bubbles, bubbles!"

And she laughed and laughed, and daddy laughed too.

Janeydear felt much better.

* * * * * * * * *

The story of Bubbles is an effective indicator to adults of how children react to a parent's divorce. The psychological, physical and social factors are all interrelated during the time of a serious crisis, such as divorce.

With the changing philosophy of marriage and divorce in this country, an increased number of children are becoming affected by divorce. Over 3.5 million families with children are headed by a single parent, with over 85% having women as the head.[3] Fourteen percent of all white children live in a single parent structure. In 1975 alone, over one million divorces occurred in this country.[10] Current estimates that 4 out of 10 marriages will be dissolved within 5 years, thus currently there are over 16 million divorced people.[7] With the divorce rate increasing, remarriages have relatively leveled off. Since divorce rates are highest in the first few years of marriage, it's only natural that the children involved are at an extremely young and vulnerable age.

The social stigmatization of divorce also changed in recent years. Although there are few misconceptions that occur, many of the stigmas are not in existence. Such stigmas were: women who are divorced are out to seduce other female's husbands; the children will not be properly disciplined; to be divorced is a disgrace, and the mother should feel guilty at not keeping the family together. Although most people believe divorce is hard on children, Landers in

1962 reported that the experience of living in an unhappy unbroken home was just as traumatic for children as the experience of living in a divorced home.[11]

A youngster's future attitude towards marriage is determined in part at the age of 3 to 6, the time when most divorces occur.[6] In order to develop an objective feeling of marriage, the parents must know how that child will react. In a study done by the University of Michigan Children's Psychiatric Hospital, teachers in nursery schools were instructed to take note on groups of children, with special emphasis on children of divorce.[6] In the study all but three youngsters showed major behavior changes. With further follow-up on these youngsters' parents, the three sets of parents seemed to have positively handled the potential guilt, blame and anger at the home. Each of these three couples remained friendly towards each other.

The nursery schoolers who were more seriously affected by their parents' divorce showed disturbances in their play which, in turn, seemed to prevent them from coping or adapting to the situation.[6] Play is the instrument children use to work out and understand stressful situations. During the divorce period and subsequent readjustment this "Play Mechanism" often breaks down temporarily.[5] Half of the youngsters reacted to divorce with immediate shock, anger and depression. They became possessive, noisy and restless. They would push, hit, kick, and occasionally even bite other children.[6]

One little boy of four years, Charlie, was a very popular and imaginative person. Much like Janey did in the story, he would also use his creativeness to hurt other children. During the divorce period, he hit people and would cry at his own actions. An example would be his becoming a "bulldozer" to knock down homes made of

blocks that other children built. He no longer enjoyed the stories he once loved that dealt with family relationships (e.g. Goldilocks.) This was typical of most children who experienced divorce in their family. Some children no longer enjoyed playing house; in fact, they dreaded it. If the child would play, they would cause fights and disrupt the play. Some children would "run away." Some girls showed no drastic change, other than developing a nagging attitude at everybody. They would constantly nag their classmates on every imaginable subject (copying the "nagging wife?".)

There are some immediate feelings that are common in children involved with divorce. One feeling is in relating to surroundings and an awareness of any change in their environment. Janey, in the Bubbles story, knew immediately that her daddy was not present. Janey also sensed that her mother was different.

Another change exhibited will be in their attitudes. In divorce, children lose the continual physical presence of the father, and their attitudes towards him may be changed. It is difficult for the divorced woman who maintains the home, to not feel that her children are leaving their love for her to that of the father. When the father constantly takes the children out, buys them presents and generally has an enjoyable time, the children will enjoy him more than the mother. However, the mother, who maintains the basic home life will provide the children with the stability needed in the family and will eventually "win over" her children. But in those first crucial months, the mother will notice a very major change in the youngster's feelings toward their father. The children most affected are those between the ages of 3 and 6.[6]

Feelings of abandonment will also occur in the child. Gripped by fear that more terrifying things will happen, they may not be able to say in so many words that they are afraid or lonely. Children must be constantly reminded that they have two parents, who both love them, and that the absent parent will see them as often as possible.[9] Even if the child knows they will live with their mother, they may fear that, if incompatibilities develop later, they may be "divorced from mommy."[9] Typically, nursery schoolers whose parents were divorcing drew pictures of a boy looking for a kite or a girl who couldn't find her way home--reflecting their feelings of abandonment.[6]

Children are also bewildered during the period of divorce. Two children in the study done by the University of Michigan reacted so strongly to their parents' divorces that they seemed to confuse their teacher with their mothers and made insatiable demands for her love and attention.[6]

What can parents do when they are facing divorce? Both must first realize that the explanations given to the child about divorce are only as good as the tone and attitude that accompany them. Children judge the depth and meaning of the situation far more from the emotional overtones than even the most reasonable phrases.[4] Children can sense what parents are too uncomfortable to talk about.

A child's mother and father are the most important part of his world. The child wants his world in one piece, not flying apart. If a child is faced with a divorce in the family, he or she must still be allowed to believe in that parent and to idealize both the mother and the father. The child has no basis for understanding the complex factors that contribute to such situations. All they can grasp is that their ideals and trusts were shattered.[9]

There are several points for parents to remember when dealing with a child about divorce.

1. It's best to tell the truth about divorce, rather than hide the fact. Stating that the two of them cannot live together without fighting will allow the child to understand better. The child knows from the relationship with friends that fighting does occur and often ends with bitter feelings.

2. The parents need to emphasize their own individual continued love to the child. Children are self-centered. Even a pretty big child can't quite grasp the fact that, even though the parents are divorced, love can still continue.

3. Make it clear that their problems are not the child's responsibility. Keep the emphasis on the PARENTS' inability to solve their problems. This approach is more fair to the child because it keeps blame on both parents together. This is necessary because most children are scolded frequently, and they are not nearly as successful as adults are in shifting the blame to someone else.

4. Realize that children will express feelings through behavior and bad behavior may be revealing what the child is thinking. Try and get behind the behavior, get it into words. It's important that the child be allowed to ask questions, raise fears and fantasies so their worries will be settled.

5. Parents--especially mothers--must not only be sensitive to the child's needs, but also to their own. They must understand and be in control of their own problems before they can deal constructively with a child's.[6]

However, in a real divorce, anger flies. There is a tendency to get a child to take sides. Since a child is the embroidment of the work and love of both parents, asking them to reject a parent is actually asking to reject a part of themselves. This can only exaggerate and prolong the child's depression.

It's extremely important for parents to know and understand their child's behavior after divorce. Many parents will do nothing to help the child understand. All this fear and frustration is bottled up until it is let loose at a different period in their life. It's not really

important who is right or wrong in the divorce, nor does it really matter who keeps the child. It is important, though, that both parents share their love with the child and maintain respect for the other parent.

When the child enters adulthood, they will finally realize that their parents are just human beings, with the strengths and weaknesses common to all. While young, though, the attacks of one parent on another may have long-range effects on a child of undermining their concept of marital relationships. Unable to discriminate between what to believe or what not to believe about adults, he or she may come to blame marriage as an institution.[4]

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